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Q&A on Co-Teaching with CEC President Marilyn Friend: Part I

By [Christina Samuels](#) on February 28, 2011 12:25 PM

Nirvi, the new reporter covering special education, has been kind enough to let me pop over for a guest post.

Soon before leaving this beat, I wrote about my top 10 most-read blog posts of 2010. Interestingly enough, a blog post from 2008 made the list, titled [Does Co-Teaching Work?](#) I figured that if a post was still getting that much readership years after it was written, there must be pent-up demand for more information on co-teaching.

[Marilyn Friend](#), the 2011 president of the Council for Exceptional Children and the author of several books on collaboration and co-teaching, was kind enough to agree to an e-mail Q&A on the topic. She has some great thoughts to offer on just what co-teaching is, and how to do it well.

People often use the terms collaboration and co-teaching interchangeably. Are they synonymous?

Collaboration refers to how professionals work together—it is based on parity, common goals, shared responsibility for key decisions, shared accountability for outcomes, and shared resources. In collaborative activities, all participants know their contributions are valued. As you can infer, collaboration is a very broad concept, one that could apply to many school-based activities, including grade level or department teams, professional learning communities, response to intervention, and so on.

Co-teaching, on the other hand, is an approach for providing services to students with disabilities or other special needs, one based on providing specialized instruction while simultaneously ensuring access to the general curriculum and a least restrictive environment. Co-teaching should be highly collaborative, but collaboration applies to many other activities as well. CEC has been focused on these issues and the critical need for increased collaboration in its recent strategic plans.

How are schools and districts using co-teaching now? What type of co-teaching arrangement is most common?

CEC members report that co-teaching has become a popular instructional approach for meeting a number of today's educational mandates. They often use it to provide services to students with disabilities in general education classrooms, whether that's at the preschool, elementary, middle school, or high school level. When implemented effectively, this enables students to access the general curriculum in the least restrictive environment while also receiving the specialized instruction to which they are entitled. For many students with disabilities, co-teaching opens instructional doors and enables them to reach their potential.

However, co-teaching is being implemented in other situations as well. For example, especially in elementary schools, some speech-language services may be provided through co-teaching. Co-teaching also is an option for the delivery of services to some students who are gifted, and for some students who

are English-language learners. And some instructional coaches or facilitators are finding that co-teaching is a way to partner with teachers to improve classroom practices.

I hasten to add that the increasing use of co-teaching should not be interpreted to mean that it's the best option for providing all the supports some students may need. It is an intuitively logical educational strategy for meeting diverse student needs, but it is not a panacea. CEC recognizes the ongoing importance of maintaining a continuum of options for students with disabilities—one size simply cannot fit all.

What are some of the qualities of a good co-teaching relationship? What should each teacher bring to the table?

Strong co-teaching partnerships evolve over multiple years of shared instruction. They are premised on two teachers who each bring strengths to the relationship. That is, each teacher should have a unique contribution to make, even though there is some overlap in their skills. Envision a **Venn diagram** of strengths. The general education teacher should bring these four types of knowledge and skills: knowledge of the curriculum and evidence-based instructional strategies (that is, content skills); skills related to group and classroom management; understanding of typical student functioning (academically, socially, emotionally, behaviorally); and expertise in pacing (that is, moving students through required curriculum during the course of the school year).

Special educators bring expertise in these four areas: deep familiarity with instructional strategies to facilitate student learning (that is, process skills); ability to design education for individual students based on their unique needs; skill in managing the procedural aspects of special education services (from team meetings, to [individualized education programs], to following all the guidelines that characterize the field); and focus on a mastery learning model.

Note again, that co-teachers may overlap somewhat on their skills, but the extraordinary power of this instructional arrangement is the differences in the types of expertise the teachers have. As the partnership grows, the teachers learn from one another, but the goal remains complementing one another rather than doing identical work side by side.

Of course, in addition to their knowledge and skills, it is imperative that co-teachers understand the reason for their partnership and work to establish parity in the classroom. I know that CEC members often mention that co-teaching works best in the context of a school with a knowledgeable principal who sets expectations, arranges supports, and actively fosters co-teaching as part of the school's service delivery system.

Stay tuned for Part II of this interview!

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